DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 488 PS 016 279

AUTHOR Pinkett, Kathleen E. L.
TITLE Situational Specificity, Cognitive Play, and Ethnic Membership in Preschool Children.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; *Cognitive Processes; Dramatic Play; *Play; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Racial Differences; *White Students
IDENTIFIERS Constructive Play; *Context Effect; Functional Play; *Situational Differences

ABSTRACT

Black and white middle class preschool children were compared on the frequency with which they engaged in functional, constructive, and dramatic cognitive play across interactive and noninteractive social play situations. Results of analyses yielded no significant racial differences on the cognitive play types across interactive and noninteractive situations. Significant situational differences were found for constructive and dramatic play, but not for functional play. Further, no significant race x situation interaction was found. It was concluded that findings indicated that the social situation, rather than ethnic membership, influenced the type of cognitive play in which children engaged. Implications for research, education, and policy are discussed. (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED277488

Situational Specificity, Cognitive Play, and Ethnic Membership in Preschool Children

Kathleen E. L. Pinkett

Kennesaw College

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Kathleen E.L. Pinkett
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS 016279

Running head: SITUATIONAL SPECIFICITY AND COGNITIVE PLAY

Requests for reprints should be sent to the author at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Kennesaw College, Marietta, Ga. 30061.

Abstract

Black and White middle SES preschool children were compared on the frequency with which they engaged in cognitive play--functional, constructive, and dramatic--across interactive and noninteractive social play situations. Analysis of variance with repeated measures was computed for data analysis. Results yielded no significant racial differences on the cognitive play types across interactive and noninteractive situations. There were significant situational differences for constructive and dramatic, but not for functional play. Further, there was no significant race x situation interaction. These findings indicated that it was the social situation, rather than ethnic membership, that influenced the type of cognitive play in which the children engaged. Implications for research, education, and policy are discussed.

Situational Specificity, Cognitive Play, and Ethic Membership in Preschool Children

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship among situational specificity, cognitive play, and ethnic membership in preschool children. Theoretically, some psychologists and sociologists assume that behaviors remain stable and continuous across situations (Endler, 1973; Wallach & Leggett, 1972). Whereas, others hold the position that situational factors are potent determinants of behavioral change (Bem, 1972; Cooley, 1902; Endler, 1973; Mead, 1934; Mischel, 1969; Sarasen, Smith, & Diener, 1975). The theoretical issue is one of situational consistency--continuity--versus situational specificity--change--of behaviors. On empirical grounds, there is evidence to indicate cross-situational consistency, changes over time, and cross-situational specificity at any particular time in personality and behavior (Emmerich, 1977; Endler, 1973; Mischel, 1969).

The assumption that situational variables are potent determinants of behaviors has been applied to various play behaviors of young children. Studies in

which play behaviors have been examined across situations have yielded inconsistent findings about situational consistency and situational specificity. Some researchers have found play behaviors of preschoolers to remain stable across various situations (Emmerich, 1977; Enslein, & Fein, 1981; Pepler, 1982; Roper & Hinde, 1978; Vandenberg, 1981). Others, however, have reported cross-situational changes in preschool play behaviors (Emmerich, 1977; McLoyd, 1985; Pinkett & Quay, 1985; Rose, Blank, & Spalter, 1975; Sanders & Harper, 1975; Shure, 1963).

The situations considered in previous studies included indoor-outdoor settings (Darville, 1982; Tizard, Philips, & Plewis, 1976), play groups (Emmerich, 1977; Rose, Blank, & Spalter, 1975), classroom activity centers (Enslein & Fein, 1981; Vandenberg, 1982), and types of play materials (McLoyd, 1985; Pepler, 1982; Suzuki & Morris, 1983). All of these situations were functions of environments external to the children and were set up by the adult. In addition, the one study in which cognitive play was included, was an examination of cognitive play nested within the Parten (1932) social

play categories. No research has examined preschool children's cognitive play across interactive and noninteractive social play situations for consistency and change. Furthermore, the cognitive play types described by Smilansky (1968)--functional, constructive, and dramatic--as a function of the spontaneous interactive and noninteractive behaviors of the child have not been studied.

The assumption that ethnic membership may be stronger than other factors as a determinant of the psychological, cognitive, and behavioral development of young children, particularly young black children, has been advocated by some researchers (Hale, 1982; Shade, 1982). In view of this position, it would seem that black and white preschool children would differ on behavioral characteristics such as the type of play in which they engage. Furthermore, it would appear that play interests would be influenced by ethnic membership more than by situational factors. In other words, the type of play in which black and white children engage would be trans-situationally consistent.

Although black and white preschoolers have been

compared on numerous variables, they have been compared on cognitive play types in one study to date (Pinkett & Quay, in press). Studies in which the cognitive play of black preschool children has been examined have included lower SES (McLoyd, 1985) and lower and middle SES black subjects (Griffing, 1980), and both black and white middle SES children (Pinkett & Quay, in press). Examining a variety of dramatic play forms, both Griffing (1980) and McLoyd (1985) reported substantial involvement in these play types by black children. Pinkett and Quay (in press) found no racial differences in frequency of engagement in Smilansky's (1968) cognitive play types--functional, constructive, and dramatic--suggesting that SES influenced play interest to a greater extent than ethnicity.

Situational influences and the interaction of ethnicity and situation on cognitive play in black and white middle SES preschoolers have not been studied. Thus, the present study was designed to investigate the relationship among situational influences, cognitive play, and ethnic membership in black and white middle SES preschool children. Specifically, the purpose of

the study was to examine whether black and white middle SES preschoolers differed in the frequency of their engagement in functional, constructive, and dramatic play across interactive and noninteractive social play situations. It was hypothesized that the social situation, rather than ethnicity, would be a determinant of cognitive play engagement.

Method

Subjects

Subjects consisted of 112 black and white, middle SES preschool children. All the children from seven preschool classrooms in two racially integrated private schools serving professional and white-collar families were included. The mean age was 4 years, 11 months, with a standard deviation of 8 months. The sample consisted of 47 boys and 65 girls, 85 black and 27 white subjects. There were 40 black and 9 white boys; and 45 black and 18 white girls.

These schools were selected because they were comparable in teaching philosophy, amount of structure, scheduling, materials, and amount of free play time scheduled. Preschoolers were studied because they are

at the point in their development in which they engage in types of cognitive play--functional, constructive, and dramatic--of interest to this study. In addition, the preschool setting provides periods during which the child can play freely. During these periods, play which is not directed by the teacher can be observed.

Procedure

Social and cognitive play behaviors of each subject were randomly sampled by means of a time-sampling procedure, in which 5-second observation periods were followed by 10-second recording periods. Each child was observed for one minute at a time during indoor free play for 80 ten-second periods, or a total of 20 minutes, over a 3-month period. Social play behaviors observed and recorded were (a) peer social interaction--defined as any social interchange with peers, including eye contact, talking, smiling, gesturing, or touching; and (b) noninteraction--defined as playing alone without any social interchanges with peers. Cognitive play behaviors observed and recorded were (a) functional--defined as play that involved simple repetitive movements which lacked purpose,

direction, and organization; (b) constructive--defined as play that was purposeful, goal-directed, organized, and creative; and (c) dramatic-defined as fantasy, make-believe, or imaginative play. These cognitive play types could have occurred with or without materials. The two social situations were identified through the social behaviors recorded--interactive and noninteractive. The interactive situation consisted of all situations in which the child engaged in social interchanges with peers, both verbal and nonverbal. The noninteractive situations consisted of all situations in which the child did not socially interact with peers, but played alone, either near by or remote from peers.

Reliability. To establish reliability for the observation system, four pairs of observers were used. The members of each pair simultaneously, but independently, observed the same subject. Reliability was computed on both the occurrence and the nonoccurrence of each behavior. The formula for computing reliability was the number of agreements divided by the sum of the number of agreements and disagreements. For the occurrence of behaviors, the

mean interobserver agreement was .92. For the nonoccurrence of behaviors, the mean interobserver agreement was .95.

Results

To ascertain whether black and white middle SES preschoolers differed in the frequency of the type of cognitive play in which they engaged across interactive and noninteractive situations, a 2 (race) x 2 (situation) analysis of variance with repeated measures on situation was computed. The statistical model was for one between-subject factor and one within-subject factor. The between-subject factor had two levels corresponding to the two groups, black and white. The within-subjects factor represented the interactive and noninteractive play situations.

Results yielded no significant racial differences in frequency of functional, constructive, and dramatic play across interactive and noninteractive situations. There were significant situation differences in cognitive play type for constructive play, $F(1,110) = 53.01$, $p < .000$, and for dramatic play, $F(1,110) = 48.71$, $p < .000$. There were no significant

differences in frequency of functional play across interactive and noninteractive situations. In addition, there was no significant race x situation interaction. The means and standard deviations for cognitive play types across interactive and noninteractive situations are presented in Table 1. These results indicated that

---

Insert Table 1 about here

---

black and white middle SES preschool children were not different in how they played across interactive and noninteractive situations. Results also indicated that all subjects engaged in constructive play in noninteractive situations more than in interactive situations, and in dramatic play in interactive situations more than in noninteractive situations. Overall, the findings indicated that the social situation, rather than ethnic membership, influenced the type of cognitive play in which the subjects engaged.

Discussion

The tested hypothesis was supported by the present results. Findings indicated that the types of cognitive

play in which the children engaged were a function of the social situation rather than ethnic membership. Subjects engaged in constructive play more frequently in noninteractive than in interactive situations and in dramatic more frequently in interactive than in noninteractive situations. In other words, while socially interacting and playing with peers, the children were more frequently involved in dramatic than constructive play. Whereas, while playing alone and not socially interacting with peers, the children engaged more frequently in constructive than dramatic play. Functional play appeared not to be influenced by situational differences.

This finding is consistent with previous research which indicates that the play of preschoolers does not remain stable across different types of situations (Emmerich, 1977; McLoyd, 1985; Rose, Blank, & Spalter, 1975; Sanders & Harper, 1975). Although the situations and play behaviors differed in the previous and the present study, the one commonality among past and present findings is that the situation appears to influence play to a greater extent than other variables.

For both the black and white children, the social play situation appeared to be a stronger influence on cognitive play interests than ethnic membership. Implicit in the present findings is the importance of considering social class membership and other psychological and sociological variables when studying behavioral differences in black and white children. Misleading conclusions may result from the practice of overlooking the varied dispositions, skills, and behaviors of black middle SES children in particular, and children from all ethnic groups in general.

One prevailing issue that emerges from the present findings is the widely-held notion that ethnic membership is synonymous with belonging to a monolithic group. This assumption has been permeated by both theoretical pronouncements and empirical studies. With few exceptions, generalizations about characteristic differences among black and white children have been based on findings from studies in which only black lower-SES children were considered and in which black lower-SES and white middle-SES subjects have been compared (Pinkett & Quay, in press). In these studies,

the confounding of race and SES have attenuated the findings. There is growing recent evidence, however, that when black lower- and middle-SES children are compared within and among themselves (Griffing, 1980; McLoyd, 1985) and when black and white children are equally represented in both lower- and middle-SES groups (Pinkett & Quay, in Press; Quay & Pinkett, in press), social class affiliation emerges as a stronger influence than ethnic membership on various aspects of development. Thus, how does one reconcile the perception of an ethnic monolith with the growing evidence of heterogeneity, that is, differing structure and quality, within both ethnic and socioeconomic status groups?

In summary, the findings from the present study suggest that researchers, teachers, and policy makers begin to go beyond all ethnic memberships and look for the commonalities and differences that may exist among children due to social class affiliation and other influencing factors. These findings also suggest that situations in which children are placed are potentially strong determinants of their behaviors. Further

research is needed in order to ascertain the influence of other types of situations on different behaviors in preschool children.

References

Bem, D. J. (1972). Constructing cross-situational consistencies in behavior: Some thoughts on Alker's critique of Mischel. Journal of Personality, 40, 17-26.

Cooley, C. H. (1902). Human nature and the social order. New York: Scribner's.

Darville, D. (1982). Ecological influences on children's play: Issues and approaches. In D. J. Pepler & K. H. Rubin (Eds.), The play of children: Current theory and research (pp. 144-153). New York: S. Krager.

Emmerich, W. (1977). Evaluating alternative models of development: An illustrative study of preschool personal-social behavior. Child Development, 48, 1401-1410.

Endler, N. (1973). The person versus the situation-a pseudo issue? A response to Alker. Journal of Personality, 41, 287-303.

Enslein, J. P., & Fein, G. G. (1981). Temporal and cross-situational stability of children's social play behavior. Developmental Psychology, 17, 760-761.

Griffing, P. (1980). The relationship between socioeconomic status and sociodramatic play among black kindergarten children. Genetic Psychology Monographs, 101, 3-34.

Hale, J. E. (1982). Black children: Their roots, culture, and learning styles. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University.

McLoyd, V. C. (1985). Are toys (just) toys? Exploring their effects on pretend play of low-income preschoolers. In Spencer, M. B., Brookins, G. K., & Allen, W. R. (Eds.), Beginnings: The social and affective development of black children (pp. 81-100). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Mead, G. H. (1934). Mind, self, and society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mischel, W. (1969). Continuity and change in personality. American Psychologist, 24, 1012-1018.

Parten, M. B. (1932). Social participation among preschool children. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 28, 136-147.

Pepler, D. J. (1982). Play and divergent thinking. In D. J. Pepler & K. H. Rubin (Eds.), The play of children: Current theory and research (pp.64-78). New York: S. Krager.

Pinkett, K. E. L., & Quay, L. C. (in press). Social orientation and cognitive play in black and white, middle SES preschool boys and girls. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology.

Quay, L. C., & Pinkett, K. E. L. (in press). Ethnic and social class comparisons of preschoolers' verbal and nonverbal communication in object-centered and object-free play. Journal of Genetic Psychology.

Roper, R., Hinde, R. A. (1978). Social behavior in a play group: Consistency and complexity. Child Development, 49, 570-579.

Rose, S. A., Blank, M., & Spalter, J. (1975). Situational specificity of behavior in young children. Child Development, 46, 464-469.

Sanders, K. M., & Harper. L. V. (1976). Free-play fantasy behavior in preschool children: Relations among gender, age, season, and location. Child Development, 17, 1182-1185.

Sarasen, I. G., Smith, R. E., & Diener, E. (1975). Personality research: Components of variance attributable to the person and situation. Journal Personality and Social Psychology, 32, 199-204.

Shade, B. J. (1982). Afro-American cognitive style: A variable in school success. Review of Education Research, 52, 219-244.

Shure, M. B. (1963). P-y-hological ecology of a nursery school, Child Development, 34, 979-992.

Smilanski, S. (1968). The effects of sociodramatic play on disadvantaged preschool children. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Suzuki, K. P., & Morris, E. K. (1983, April). The effects of creative and idealized toys on children's play. P-per presented at the biennial meeting of the Society of Research in Child Development, Detroit, MI.

Tizard, B., Philips, J., Plewis, I. (1976). Play in preschool centres-I. Play measures and their relationship to sex, age, and IQ. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17, 251-264.

Vandenberg, B. (1981). Environmental and cognitive factors in social play. Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 31, 169-175.

Wallach, M. A., & Leggett, M. I. (1972). Testing the hypothesis that a person will be consistent: Stylistic consistency versus situational specificity in size of children's drawings. Journal of Personality, 40, 309-330.

Young, V. H. (1970). Family and childhood in a southern Georgia community. American Anthropologist, 72, 269-288.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Noninteractive and Peer Interactive Functional, Constructive, and Dramatic Play

(N = 112)

		Variable[1]					
Group	n	NIF	PIF	NIC	PIC	NID	PID
Black	85						
M		.171	.164	.588	.411	.155	.322
SD		.135	.146	.217	.260	.140	.218
White	27						
M		.206	.231	.538	.359	.152	.289
SD		.121	.129	.195	.157	.135	.188
Total Group							
M		.186	.198	.563	.385	.154	.306
SD		.128	.138	.206	.209	.136	.203

$p < .000$

[1]NIF = Noninteractive Functional
PIF = Peer Interactive Functional
NIC = Noninteractive Constructive
PIC = Peer Interactive Constructive
NID = Noninteractive Dramatic
PID = Peer Interactive Dramatic